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AN ADDRESS

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At the Funeral

OF

MRS. HANNAH C. STEARNS,

OF BROOKLINE,

On Sunday, Nov. 8th, 1857.

BY REV. F. H. HEDGE, D.D.

BOSTON :

PRINTED BY DAVID CLAPP.

1857.

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A D D R E S S .

FELLOW CHRISTIANS: —

Our worship this afternoon is changed to a funeral service. We solemnize the departure from this congregation, as well as from the family circle, of one who for many years was intimately and variously connected with the Church and Society worshipping in this place. Ordinarily, the obsequies paid to departed friends are best performed in the private dwellings in which their earthly existence terminated — in the close circle of their own kindred and friends. But in this case there seemed to be a peculiar fitness in making the public sanctuary the scene of those tributes which friends would pay to one who so loved the sanctuary; who desired, in the language of the Psalmist, “to dwell in the house of the Lord — to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple.”

The friend and fellow-worshipper whose earthly form we now commit to its final rest, was little known beyond the immediate and limited sphere of personal intercourse and private duty in which she moved. But to fill faithfully, and profitably, and acceptably, a limited sphere, is so much better and so much more difficult than to work imperfectly in a larger one, that human beings must be judged by their completeness, not by their position. The welfare of society depends mainly on the adaptation of individuals to their appointed places, on their fidelity to their position, on the regular discharge and conscientious satisfaction of the duties of that position; it depends on constancy, diligence, good-will, affection, conscientiousness in private life; it depends on precisely those qualities of mind and heart which characterized and distinguished, in so remarkable a degree, our departed friend. There is no greater benefactor to society than the faithful and affectionate husband and wife, the wise and conscientious parent, the kind neighbor, the active member of a religious society, the true Christian in private life. All this we may freely and sincerely affirm of the departed.

Mrs. HANNAH C. STEARNS, a native of this town, born in 1803, was eldest daughter of James Pierce, and cousin of the late Dr. Pierce, the former pastor of this church. The loss of her mother threw her, while yet a child, on her own resources, and necessitated those habits of self-dependence and self-direction which I sometimes think are a full compensation for even so great a loss. After the death of her father, in 1826, an honorable love of independence impelled her to maintain herself by her own faculty and industry, rather than burden others with the care of her support. In 1832, she was married to Mr. Stearns, and for twenty-five years fulfilled, as wife and mother, and head of a household, the highest mission of woman, developing the abilities, exercising the functions and practising the virtues which the faithful discharge of that mission involves.

The last two years of her mortal life were shaded, yet scarcely shaded, by a slow decline, which hereditary predisposition stamped as incurable consumption of the vital organs. She knew that her end was near, but greeted its approach without shrinking, and faced death without dread. To her unquestioning faith the world to come was as real as the present, and as surely irradiated and made glad

by the presence and blessing of the all-loving Father of spirits and of mercies. Gradually sinking in bodily strength, she retained to the very last her mental powers, and could read and converse through all her illness, with accustomed relish. By the blessing of God, her confinement to the sick-room was of brief duration. On Wednesday last, she perceived, in her extreme weakness, that the night was come whose morning is not of this world. In perfect possession of all her faculties, she took leave of her friends. To a relative who entered toward evening, she proposed music. The hymn in which you have just joined, "There is a land of pure delight," was played and sung at her request, and when the piece was concluded she had fallen asleep.

The character of the woman whose external life-course, and the leading incidents in whose history, I have thus briefly indicated, was perfectly transparent and easy of comprehension to all who can appreciate simple goodness and an honest, affectionate, guileless nature. There was no disguise or mystery about her, no dark corners in her soul, neither was any guile found in her mouth. The truth and simplicity of her nature were shed like sunlight on all who came near her. Open as the day to friends and

acquaintance, whoever beheld her face was aware of her thoughts; whoever witnessed her actions read her heart; and could she have laid open the very interior of her mind, it is my belief that no new discovery would have been made by such revelation, unless it were a greater depth of faith, and piety, and love, than even her best friends had imputed to her. The three most eminent of the Christian graces were constituent elements of her character — humility, gentleness, charity. Duty was her meat and her drink; she had no ambition beyond the consciousness of well-doing, and knew no higher satisfaction than the secret approbation of the heart.

Without pretension and without enthusiasm, she was thoroughly religious in character and life. Her religion was eminently practical, and better known by its fruits than by its dogmas or emotions. It was that religion which acts as a restraint upon every evil propensity and an incentive to every good one; which makes faithful in every duty, patient in every trial, honest in all dealings, prompt in every office of love; that religion which serves God and man with a willing, constant and devoted service; that religion which is best to live by and best to die by, which alone can make living useful and dying blest.

This religion is irrespective of all forms of speculative belief, and above all. It belongs to no sect. It is neither Catholic nor Protestant, Trinitarian nor Unitarian. It does not appear that men die more happily with one kind of creed than with another, but it does appear that they die more happily with one kind of conscience than another; and though the Christian cannot feel that he has merited heaven by his works, though he places his reliance on the mercy of God in Christ, he knows that mercy is not unconditional, and that the Christian character alone can enter the kingdom of heaven. The religion of the life—practical religion—is the best comforter of the dying hour. The Christian believer who has lived by faith while in the body, can face death without dread, because he knows, because he feels that death for him is of the body, and not of the soul; because he has already laid hold on eternal life. It is no longer with him a matter of doubt, but of actual experience, what eternity has in store for him. He feels that it can bring him nothing more desirable than progress in the path already entered—progress from light to light and from strength to strength; and he knows that it will bring that. Piety contains within itself the assurance

and the pledge of immortal life. It is conscious of an impulse, a power, a devotion, which is stronger than death, and which, though all the waves and the billows go over it, cannot sink and cannot go out in endless night. This is the feeling which says, "O Grave, where is thy victory?"—the triumph of the Christian who feels that God has already given him the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The death of a believer who lays himself down to die without fear or misgiving, strong in the assurance of a happy resurrection, as the tired laborer lies down to sleep when the toils of the day are ended, is a great triumph—the greatest our nature can ever know—a triumph of the spiritual in man over the natural, of faith and hope over sense and the world. It is good to witness such triumphs, to see, as in this case, not the strong man but the feeble woman, descend fearless and alone into the unknown dark, relying on the safe-conduct of an unseen spiritual power, mightier than death. It was evidently and eminently the practical religion of a pure and beneficent life that gave comfort and support to our friend in the dying hour. The devoted mother and wife who had fulfilled to the uttermost, so far as human frailty would permit, the

duties involved in those relations, who lived not for self and thought not of self, but lived for duty and thought only how she might serve God and promote the happiness of those around her, might well lay down the load of mortal infirmity and care, with the tranquillity and confidence of one who has fought a good fight and kept the faith. Such examples are most instructive. They illustrate the value of life, the blessedness of well-doing, the power of faith. They bring the spiritual world near to us, they light up the dull eye of death with the radiance of immortal hope and eternal day.

Fellow Christians, we have lost, in the departed whose obsequies we now celebrate, a valued and valuable member of our community. We may well sympathize with the husband bereft of the companion of his days, with the sons bereft of the mother that watched over and guided and blessed their childhood. We, too, as members of this society, as worshippers in this sanctuary, have lost a zealous friend, a fellow worshipper, a fellow communicant, and, I may add, an efficient helper and devoted servant of the church; for thirty years a teacher in the Sunday school; for more than forty, a singer in the choir. I

said lost ; yet not all lost, I trust. What is gain to her in quitting this world is not all loss to us. She may aid us still with her memory as with her life, with the light of her example as with her works. Being dead, she yet serves us; being absent, she is with us still. Spiritual union is a tie which the grave does not cancel. Those who are one in Christ are one irrespectively of earthly distinctions, and independently of time and sense.

“One family we dwell in him,
 One church above, beneath,—
 Though now divided by the stream,
 The narrow stream of Death.”

Let us live in this faith while we live in the flesh, that, dying in this faith, we may die victorious, with a hope full of immortality.

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